



Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique électronique pour les recherches
sur Bruxelles / Het elektronisch wetenschappelijk
tijdschrift voor onderzoek over Brussel / The e-journal
for academic research on Brussels

Collection générale | 2015

The Gnawa musicians in Brussels: a cultural reorganisation

Les musiciens gnawa à Bruxelles : une reconfiguration culturelle

Gnawa-muzikanten in Brussel: een culturele herconfiguratie

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Translator: Jane Corrigan



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1294>

DOI: 10.4000/brussels.1294

ISSN: 2031-0293

Publisher

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Electronic reference

Hélène Secheyaye and Stéphanie Weisser, « The Gnawa musicians in Brussels:
a cultural reorganisation », *Brussels Studies* [Online], General collection, no 90, Online since 24 August
2015, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1294> ; DOI :
10.4000/brussels.1294



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Number 90, August 24th 2015. ISSN 2031-0293

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The Gnawa musicians in Brussels: a cultural reorganisation

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This article examines the Gnawa musical practices in Brussels through an ethnomusicological approach. The Gnawa belong to a community originating in Morocco, and have integrated new elements into their practices, which could be explained by their relocation abroad. Furthermore, the comparison with the situation in other cities allows us to assume that the situation in Brussels has a unique character. There have been changes in the methods of learning this musical practice, women now mix with men not only in secular but also ritual musical practice, and there has been a diversification of performance contexts. This has prompted Gnawa musicians to learn other Moroccan musical styles, which they use as inspiration for their Gnawa repertoire, in theory closed to the integration of outside elements. Far from deploring a hypothetical loss of authenticity due to their migration, the Gnawa in Brussels have redefined their musical practices and their methods of operation, by adapting them to their new place of residence. In so doing, they continually reshape their identity, which allows them to be part of a very specific cultural and social heritage while exploring new territories.

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Introduction

1. In 2014, Belgium commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the signature of the Belgo-Moroccan agreement of 17 February 1964, which allows many Moroccan workers to make a living in Belgium. Following the signature of this agreement, the number of Moroccans living in Brussels increased significantly: from 461 in 1961, to 39,294 in 1970 [Loriaux, 2004]. Fifty years later, in 2014, there were 191,292 Moroccans living in Brussels who had acquired Belgian nationality, or Belgians with Moroccan parents who had acquired Belgian nationality, which makes it the city with the highest concentration of this community in Belgium.¹ Moroccan migration is marked by its extraordinary geographical scope – more than one hundred countries – and by its significance, as 10% of the Moroccan population lives abroad. However, the regularity of yearly visits (55% of Moroccans who live outside of Morocco returned for a short visit in 2013) is a sign of the attachment which Moroccan migrants feel towards their country of origin [Alaoui, 2013].

2. There is an important cultural diversity within this population, which is often wrongly considered to be a homogeneous entity. This article shall analyse a specific facet of this Moroccan diaspora culture in the capital of Europe, namely the Gnawa in Brussels.² Here, we shall consider the Gnawa as part of a vast transnational Moroccan community, defined by Riva Kastoryano as 'a community composed of individuals or groups established within the different national societies, based on interests and common references (territorial, religious and linguistic references) and on transnational networks to reinforce their solidarity beyond national borders' [Alaoui, 2013].

3. This research is based on data gathered in Brussels through participant observation, a method which allows an immersion in the context and permanent contact with the musicians. In this framework, the recording of seven performances between April and July 2014 constitutes the main part of our corpus under analysis.

1. The Gnawa, from slavery to international renown

4. As a minority community in Morocco,³ the Gnawa claim to be the descendents of slaves from western Africa who developed a specific cultural practice towards the end of the 19th century [Becker, 2011]. Although the Gnawa are Muslim,⁴ their rituals – which combine animism, worship of saints and music – are not in keeping with those advocated by Islamic orthodoxy. Furthermore, due to their African roots, the Gnawa have been more marginalised than other brotherhoods whose practices are quite similar [El-Hamel, 2008; Sum, 2012].

5. The Gnawa perform in two contexts: rituals, during which a repertoire of sacred music is played in a religious framework, and public concerts, whose repertoire is both secular and sacred, in front of an audience which is not always aware of the rituals. Although certain studies tend to present rituals as being more important from a historical point of view [Hell 2002; Kapchan 2008], others underline the complementarity between the two practices since the beginning [Majdouli 2007; Becker 2011]. Created in 1998, the *Festival Gnaoua et Musiques du Monde* in Essaouira (Morocco) presents these two dimensions and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors (figure 1). According to historian Cynthia Becker, this success is the result of a process of awareness raising and legitimisation among Moroccan and western popula-

¹ Source: Jan Hertogen, NP Data, 2011 et Le Soir, 15 February 2014; MCRME Maroc, cited in the exhibit Nass Belgica, Botanique (Brussels), February – April 2014.

² The transcription method chosen for the terms in Moroccan dialect is intended to be simple, and does not show the variations of a word. The agreement between nouns and adjectives, in view of the many irregular plurals in Arabic, is the same regardless of the number: thus, Gnawa is used as a masculine and feminine word as well as for singular and plural forms.

³ Due to their similar origins and ritual practices, the Gnawa are very close to other northern African groups from a spiritual point of view: Stambouli (Tunisia), Sambani (Libya), Bilali (Algeria), Zar (Sudan) and Bori (Hausa from Nigeria and Niger) [El-Hamel, 2008].

⁴ With the exception of a Jewish community in Fes [personal communication with the musicians Karim [alias] and Hicham Bilali, July 2014].

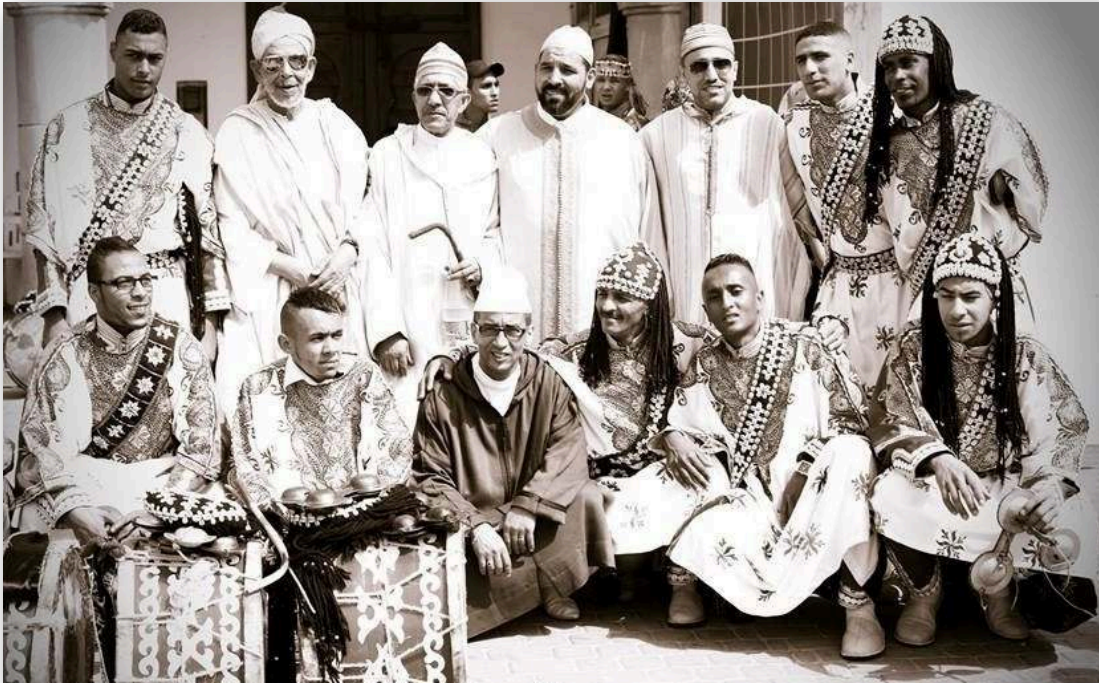


Figure 1. Gnawa musicians at the Essaouira festival. Among them, the maalem Rida and Abdelwahid Stitou, Mohamed-Saïd Aksari and other musicians active in Belgium. Photo: Chim'ss Shaadi (with the permission of the author).

tions, begun by the Gnawa at the end of the 19th century [Becker, 2011].

6. During the rituals – called *lila* ('night') – sacrifices, trance, possession and practices of fakirs are carried out in private, to songs honouring God, the saints and the entities of the invisible world (the *mluk*). The

guembri lute plays a central role during Gnawa performances and is known to attract the spirits, which are summoned and present during *lila* ceremonies. The mystical aura of these rituals has aroused much interest, and the Gnawa universe is often approached from this angle [Pâques, 1978, 1991; Lapassade, 1998; Chlyeh, 1999, 2000; Hell, 2002; Baldassare, 2005; Kapchan 2000, 2004, 2008, 2011].

7. Nevertheless, and although 'the Gnawa place great emphasis on the essential function of music and dance' [Hell, 2002], the Gnawa musical reality has not been the subject of much analysis: apart from Timothy Fuson, whose works could not be consulted, and Maisie Sum [Sum, 2012], the studies are limited to a brief presentation of the instruments and main features of the repertoire [Baldassare, 1999; Ay-doun, 1992 and 1999]. This gap constitutes one of the starting points of the present research, as well as the (relatively recent) growing interest on behalf of the academic community in the study of musical practices in a transnational and diaspora context. While Mark Slobin stated already in 1994 that 'Intra-diasporic music making really could use more attention, even among ethnomusicologists. This might require both a close-up and a panoramic lens' [2012], this field has only been studied recently in Europe. In his recent works, Jean Pouchelon has focused on the Gnawa populations who have lived a migratory experience in Paris and Montreal [Pouchelon, 2014 and 2015].

8. Despite its relatively small territory, Belgium ranks fourth in the world as a host country for the Moroccan diaspora⁵ [Alaoui, 2013]. Brussels stands out due to the significance of its Gnawa community (in the broad sense): although Gnawa communities exist in other European and North American cities (Paris, London, Montreal, Barcelona), the Gnawa community in Brussels is among the biggest.

9. In this particular context, an analysis of Gnawa musical practices in Brussels seems pertinent. Who are the main stakeholders? How do

⁵ After France (32.27% of the Moroccan diaspora lives there), Spain (20.06%) and Italy (12.01%) [Alaoui, 2013].

Figure 2. The group Kerkerba, accompanied by the brass band Re-mork, in a parade in 2012. Photo: Leen Lagrou (with the permission of the author).



they organise themselves? How do their performances generate meaning in Belgium?

10. Gnawa musicians, in Morocco as well as abroad,⁶ are dancers, singers and instrumentalists. They transmit music orally. Learning takes place gradually through participation in performances. The rules of music and dance performances are acquired through the repeated expo-

sure to the music and by imitating the masters. In the vast majority of cases, the Gnawa musical practice is not written.⁷

11. Although it pertains to oral tradition, the Gnawa musical repertoire is surprisingly codified and includes a specific number of songs and dances which are performed in a precise order. However, one performance always differs from another in its general structure or in more specific details, such as the musical motifs. As the Gnawa insist on the importance of respecting tradition, the meaning given to the performances may therefore be found in the freedom which the musicians grant themselves, thus influencing a more structured position [Sum, 2012]. In this perspective, the differences between practices in Morocco and in Belgium may be studied for their potential meaning.

2. The Gnawa musical community in Brussels: observations

2.1. From the Gnawa in Brussels to Gnawa de Bruxelles: birth of a practice

12. It is difficult to determine precisely when the Gnawa arrived in Belgium. Jazzman Luc Mishalle, who has been very active with the cultural communities of foreign origin since 1980, recalls: 'I only noticed their presence towards the end of the 1980s. They were groups of musicians inspired by traditional Gnawa music, but none of them were led by a *maalem*. They were musical rather than cultural groups.'⁸ The arrival in Brussels in 1998 of the *maalem* Rida Stitou, son of the *maalem* Abdelwahid 'Stitou' Barrady from Tangier, marked a turning point in the history of the community. Very quickly, Rida gathered musicians – not

⁶ The term 'diaspora' is used here in the sense given to it by Wang Gung-Wu, who 'places emphasis on the multiplicity of ties between communities formed by the dispersion of a population rather than on the exile from a place of origin and the ties with this place' [Berry, 2006].

⁷ One example of the notation of the order of pieces in a *lila* by a *maalem* has been mentioned [Kapchan, 2007].

⁸ Luc Mishalle, personal communication, 23 June 2014.

necessarily from Gnawa families – and formed a group⁹ which plays on various occasions, for *lila* ceremonies as well as for weddings or neighbourhood festivities (figure 2). Two years later, the ASBL *Arts et folklore gnawa* was created on the initiative of Rida and Mohamed-Saïd Aksari,¹⁰ who wished to give legitimacy to their activities. They thus hoped to present a clear structure to the people who wish to know about them, as well as to event organisers who wish to hire them for a performance. In addition to concerts and *lila* ceremonies, they are involved in many activities, usually carried out voluntarily by the musicians: information sessions in schools on Gnawa culture, performances for elderly people and even training sessions for beginners.

13. The ASBL therefore has a social vocation as well: the founders insist on the positive impact which the knowledge of music and culture have on the well-being of individuals, mainly children. The ASBL presents itself as a local association, in which young people may find a driving force for themselves. The co-founder of the ASBL, Mohamed-Saïd, describes the structure as a 'seal or a signature' which allows it to differentiate itself from other groups which play traditional Moroccan music. However, the group is faced with a lack of recognition on behalf of the authorities: as it no longer receives material assistance, the musicians must finance the maintenance and purchase of instruments and costumes, the cost of meeting and rehearsal space, as well as the travel costs for their concerts.¹¹

14. The members of the ASBL have chosen not to apply for Moroccan grants, thus asserting their roots in Belgium: 'If we receive grants from

Morocco, we must be involved in exchanges with the country, and this is not possible. The collaboration must take place in Belgium where we live, and not in Morocco.'¹² *Gnawa de Bruxelles* therefore wish to develop their activities in Brussels, build bridges with the local authorities and adapt to the operational modes in effect in their host country, even if the procedures are slow and complex.

15. Although Rida maintains very close ties with a Gnawa group from Tangier for which he continues to act as *maalem* throughout the year, *Gnawa de Bruxelles* are becoming established in the Belgian landscape. The group is currently composed of musicians of Gnawa origin and others who are specialised in another style of Moroccan music, and whose knowledge of the Gnawa repertoire allows them to participate in certain performances. This integration of musicians also has the effect of widening the repertoire of the group: *Gnawa de Bruxelles* are also starting to play popular Moroccan music and the repertoire of other brotherhoods.

16. The ASBL has notable visibility and recognition in Brussels, to the point where young people of Moroccan origin who have no connection with the Gnawa world, become involved as completely integrated members of the troupe. The case of Yassine is particularly telling in this respect: having grown up in Brussels in a family of Moroccan origin with no connection with the Gnawa, he spent time with *Gnawa de Bruxelles* in his neighbourhood since his childhood, and gradually started playing the *grageb* (large metal castanets specific to Gnawa music), and then learned singing, dancing and the drum. Today, he accompanies Rida in

⁹ Video excerpt: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8dbunyaexk> The group *Karkaba*, which emerged from the weekly rehearsals organised by *Gnawa de Bruxelles* and the association *Met-X*, accompanies the brass band *Remork*. This piece is a composition by Luc Mishalle, the creator of *Met-X*, based on the Gnawa rhythms played on the *tbel* (drum) and the *grageb* (castanets).

¹⁰ Mohamed-Saïd Aksari, current president of the ASBL Arts et folklore gnawa, personal communication, 24 April 2014.

¹¹ *Maalem* Rida 'Stitou' Barrady, personal communication, 23 April 2014.

¹² Mohamed-Saïd Aksari, personal communication, 24 April 2014.

his concerts abroad, and this summer married the daughter of a famous Moroccan *maalem*, making his spiritual union with the Gnawa universe official.

17. The musical characteristics of the repertoire played by *Gnawa de Bruxelles* also reflect this redefinition of the usual categories of the Gnawa universe. Thus, the *maalem* Rida from Tangier plays a style specific to this region, called *shamali* ('from the north'), while many of his musicians play the *marσαoui* style, which is present in the rest of the country. The difference between these two musical styles is noticeable in the way the *guembri* is played, which is more melodic in the north and percussive in the south,¹³ as well as in the other musical elements (drum, singing) and the dancing. The inevitable collaboration between musicians from these two traditions creates a style which incorporates *shamali* and *marσαoui* characteristics.

18. Today, *Gnawa de Bruxelles* are more active on the secular scene than on the ritual scene: Rida usually goes to Morocco to perform *lila* ceremonies, and rarely performs them in Brussels. He goes on tour abroad regularly, accompanied by one or more of his musicians from Brussels, playing with jazzmen or other known groups from the west. He is also the *maalem* for a Gnawa group from Amsterdam. Perhaps this situation explains the arrival on the Brussels scene of a new Gnawa group called *Gnawa Al Manar*¹⁴.

2.2. Other Gnawa in Brussels: extension and diversification

19. In 2007, several Gnawa arrived from Morocco to settle in Belgium. In addition to Rida 'Stitou', two other *maalem* live in Brussels: they master all of the instruments, know the musical repertoire and are able to lead a *lila* properly by directing the contacts with the invisible world.

20. Karim (alias) is the son of a *maalem* from Fes who initiated him into Gnawa practices. In Belgium, he chose to stay with *Gnawa de Bruxelles* and is now in charge of the weekly rehearsals. These rehearsals are the result of a desire for collaboration between amateur and Gnawa musicians, and mark a formalisation of learning outside the Gnawa universe. During rehearsals, the *maalem* Karim shows the way to beginners, and does not hesitate to repeat a movement many times until the 'students' are able to do it themselves. The group of beginners is called *Kerkeba* (one of the transliterations of the name of Gnawa metal castanets). Alone or with an amateur brass band conducted by Luc Mishalle, they play a repertoire of jazzy compositions in which Gnawa rhythms are mixed with Gnawa pieces accompanied by brass instruments. In addition to this activity, Karim participates in all of the *Gnawa de Bruxelles* concerts and plays the *guembri* in the *lila* ceremonies. Despite his status as a *maalem*, Karim does not have his own troupe and has continued to work closely with Rida. His personal situation limits him to this role: he cannot accept work in his own name or travel outside the Belgian territory.

21. Hicham Bilali was initiated by the *maalem* Hamid, also in Fes, where he grew up in Karim's circle. Following some European tours, he settled in Brussels, which he felt was home to the only professional Gnawa in Europe.¹⁵ After a few years of collaboration with Rida, he decided to leave *Gnawa de Bruxelles* and join *Daqqa Al Manar*, another group from Brussels which was founded in 2007 and which plays traditional Moroccan music. Since 2009, Hicham is in charge of everything related to Gnawa music, and has formed a group of Gnawa musicians. Although they are not an ASBL, *Gnawa Al Manar* are in demand, for performances of ceremonies and concerts as well as for *lila* ceremonies.

¹³ Source: different interviews and musical analyses carried out with the musicians Rida Stitou, Imane Guemssy and Karim between April and July 2014.

¹⁴ Video excerpt: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iAkNPYDkoU> (Start watching the video at 0'43). The group *Gnawa al Manar*, recently renamed *Black Koyo* and led by Hicham Bilali (on the *guembri*), in this case calls to mind the traditional *lila*, with the musicians seated in a line along the wall. In this excerpt, they play different pieces from the sacred repertoire. Despite the visible presence of an amplifier during the filming of the video, the sound of the *guembri* is hard to detect, as it was during the traditionally acoustic performances. However, now the *guembri* are amplified during each public performance, both secular and sacred.

¹⁵ Hicham Bilali, personal communication, 9 November 2014.

nies. Unlike *Gnawa de Bruxelles*, *Gnawa Al Manar* organise at least one *lila* per year in Brussels, during the month before Ramadan.

22. The members of *Gnawa de Bruxelles* and *Gnawa Al Manar* know and think highly of each other, but the competition which exists between them makes their relations somewhat tricky. Thus, the *maalem* Rida claims without hesitation that 'there is only one traditional Gnawa group in Brussels'.¹⁶ However, not only does Rida know of the existence of this other group, he spends time with them, and some of the musicians from *Gnawa de Bruxelles* mix occasionally with *Gnawa Al Manar* and *vice versa*.

23. It is important to note that the Gnawa universe in Brussels was recently the setting of an event which calls into question traditional constructions much more fundamentally, and in particular the gender-based distribution of roles in rituals and performances. Imane Guemssy, a young woman from Casablanca who arrived in Brussels in 2013, joined *Gnawa de Bruxelles*. She is self-taught and did not receive any instruction in Morocco, where in Gnawa practices, women traditionally have only two roles: that of the *moqaddema*, therapist medium and/or medium responsible for the ritual and communication with the invisible entities which determine the success of the *lila*, and that of the person who goes into a trance, as stated by Hell [2002]. Women very rarely play Gnawa music. Very generally speaking, in Morocco, a female musician is considered negatively, especially if she plays a string instrument [Aydoun, 1992]. Although this negative view is slowly disappearing, there are few female Gnawa musicians. And they are usually only present for secular occasions: women never play in *lila* ceremonies [Sum, 2012].

24. In Brussels, this 'rule' is not obeyed: Imane plays with a group of men during secular concerts, in which she has the same role as the other musicians. Of course, she is not able to participate in the dances and is not allowed to sit in the row of musicians around the *maalem*,

but this is due to her status as a beginner and not to the fact that she is a woman.¹⁷ She also played in the *lila* which took place in Brussels in June 2014, without giving rise to any reactions in particular. The presence of women in *Gnawa de Bruxelles* is not entirely new: Karim, the *maalem* in charge of rehearsals, remembers that a few years ago there were three or four women in the Gnawa group, whom he says were more interested in another musical style and came to the rehearsals only to learn the rhythms. Imane's approach is entirely different: her goal is to master the entire Gnawa repertoire, and to be able to lead her own female Gnawa group as a *maalema*.¹⁸

25. This approach is particularly interesting when it is considered with respect to the growing secularisation of Gnawa practices, which has been observed in particular by Kapchan. According to the latter, the loss of meaning and interest in the ritual role of the *moqaddema*, which is no longer needed during concerts, has forced Gnawa women into a state of inactivity [Kapchan, 2011]. Imane, whose objective is to become a musician and leader of the ritual, therefore aims to reclaim the mystical power and lead the musical performance.

3. The Gnawa in Brussels: cultural ambassadors

3.1. A facet of Moroccan culture in Belgium

26. By promoting Moroccan music, dance, costumes and views of the world, the Gnawa integrate their exoticism into the artistic landscape of Brussels. They participate in the life of the capital, through activities intended for entertainment as well as activities aimed at discovery and learning about another culture. As we have seen, this attitude is based on a desire to share a culture as well as a desire to sell it and to sell oneself. Hence the attention to detail which the Gnawa have shown in their performances (costumes, perfumes, dances). They have also developed ideas with a very strong reference to tradition. This folklorisa-

¹⁶ Rida Stitou, personal communication, 24 April 2014.

¹⁷ Hicham Bilali, personal communication, 26 February 2015.

¹⁸ Imane Guemssy, personal communications, April-July 2014.

tion process, which emerged in the 19th century among the Gnawa in Morocco [Becker, 2011], has been seen elsewhere, in particular among the Mursi in Ethiopia [Ferran, 2012].

27. When the Gnawa who live in Brussels play with Belgian musicians, they confront them with other ways of learning. While in Belgium, music is often felt to require theoretical knowledge and a specialisation in an instrument, the Gnawa advocate learning through the practice of a repertoire considered as a whole, whereby everyone knows and masters not only the instruments, but also dancing and singing. The weekly lessons are not only intended for Belgians of non-Moroccan origin: they are also aimed at 'teaching Moroccans about Moroccan culture',¹⁹ i.e. teaching an immigrant population about part of their roots. In this perspective, the Gnawa see themselves as belonging to a transnational Moroccan community and are openly proud to act as a connection between Belgium and Morocco.

3.2. The western-style Gnawa

28. Pouchelon [2012] and Hell [2002] have underlined the democratisation of Gnawa society following western interest in it. The consequences of this democratisation are clearly visible in Brussels. While their ideology advocates total coherence with traditional values, the reality is somewhat different. Imane's project to become a *maalema* is not discouraged by the other musicians, even if the possibility of seeing a woman play the *guembri* on the Belgian scene raises concerns among the community. Due to her unique position, Imane risks becoming a disloyal competitor for obtaining contracts with event organisers. The organisation of rehearsals as a result of the collaboration between *Gnawa de Bruxelles* and Met-X, an association aimed at mixing amateur musical practice and the music of immigrants, introduced a new method of learning which is completely foreign to Gnawa customs, and is based on formal learning out of context (figure 3). Furthermore, Brussels is a city where many Moroccans live, but the lack of people of Gnawa origin means that many musicians in the group do not have a Gnawa background at all. The integration of people who are outside



Figure 3. Gnawa music lesson given by the maalem Rida Stitou at the premises of the association Met-X. Photo: Mohamed-Saïd Aksari (with the permission of the author).

the tradition is preferred above an association between all of the Gnawa musicians in Brussels, thus illustrating the existence of competition between the groups despite a limited distribution network, unlike what is seen in Montreal [Pouchelon, 2012]. The main aspect of Gnawa identity as defined by the musicians in Brussels goes beyond parentage, and seems to be linked to the desire to keep Gnawa musical memory alive through practice and spiritual relationships.

29. Finally, this reorganisation of Gnawa practices has led to a verbalisation of practices, initiated by the Gnawa themselves. Thus, *Gnawa de Bruxelles* hold activities regularly which are aimed at explaining their musical practices and rituals. Hicham is currently working on a project which would stage *lila* ceremonies intended for an uninformed public,²⁰

¹⁹ Mohamed-Saïd Aksari, personal communication, 24 April 2014.

²⁰ Various personal communications with Hicham Bilali, August-September 2014.

with a dual objective: on the one hand, to gain the interest of people who may then hire the Gnawa group *Al Manar*, and on the other hand, create new spaces for musical practice in a context which currently does not leave much room for Gnawa ceremonies. Through this project, Hicham hopes to revive the demand for *lila* ceremonies in Brussels (with or without a ritual purpose), and continues to act as *maalem* in this new performance framework.

3.3. Brussels: an ideal meeting place

30. Two organised Gnawa groups exist in Brussels, which is apparently unique in the Moroccan diaspora. As mentioned above, these groups do not function independently of each other: certain musicians from one group sometimes play in the other group, or gather during *lila* ceremonies. Each group has its Gnawa musical register (*shamali* or *marsaoui*), but also plays repertoires other than that of the Gnawa (*daqqa marrakchiyya*, *'issawa*, *ghayta*). The fact that there are not very many Moroccan musicians in Belgium prompts them to bring different Moroccan subcultures together, thus creating bridges between them. Martin Stokes made the same observation: 'In a diaspora situation, music [...] unites the diaspora communities by creating musical contexts in which the country of origin is evoked in a semiotic fashion through sound' [Stokes, 1994, our translation].

31. Viviana Pâques had already noticed that Gnawa music had influenced the other traditional Moroccan music styles: '[the Gnawa traditions] have greatly influenced the other brotherhoods, which add – as the Aïssawa do for example – a Gnawa piece at the end of their singing and dancing ceremonies, with the colourful veils characteristic of their mystical journey' [Pâques, 1999]. In Brussels, the opposite is also seen and innovations emerge. Thus, during a performance in 2012,²¹ the group *Gnawa de Bruxelles* used trumpets from the secular repertoire *daqqa marrakchiyya*, presenting it as a performance of Gnawa music. This mix seems to be unprecedented in Gnawa history. While it is true that fusion is now an aspect of Gnawa culture, in this particular situa-

tion the musicians claim to be Gnawa practising their tradition, and not creating a fusion.

3.4. Gnawa music in Brussels: continuation of a tradition of fusion

32. The specificity of the situation in Brussels leads the Gnawa musicians who live there to play frequently²² with other Moroccan musicians, which causes a change of status for the latter. Gnawa culture had a status of 'African' culture in Morocco, and now has the status of 'Moroccan' culture in Belgium. Furthermore, during the *Gnawa de Bruxelles* or *Al Manar* public processions, many people of Moroccan origin stop to watch and dance, even though, in Morocco, the Gnawa brotherhood is still considered to be marginal by a large part of the population [Hell, 2002; El-Hamel, 2008]. While the notion of mix 'entails the prior existence of "unmixed" styles' [Stokes, 2012], Gnawa music in Brussels, although mixed, integrates new characteristics from other Moroccan cultures. This authenticity sought by the public thus corresponds more to the concept defined by Laurent Aubert: it is not in line with the rules which are supposed to be unchanging, but with the sincerity of the approach, the ability to adapt to a context and the capacity to meet a demand [Aubert, 2005].

33. In this community of Gnawa in Brussels, openness towards others is an indispensable condition for the survival of the culture. Far from the Gnawa nerve centre in Morocco, whose heritage serves as a source for new musical elements, they reinvest and reinvent ancestral practices to adapt to their environment and keep Gnawa culture alive, thus creating a specific Gnawa culture in Brussels, in the end respecting the spirit of a tradition based on fusion since its origins.

²¹ Concert given in the framework of the Midis-Minimes festival in Brussels on 9 July 2012.

²² According to the season, the musicians mainly play at weddings and parties, from two times per month to several times per week.

Conclusion

34. Among the cities of the Moroccan diaspora, Brussels is home to the most Gnawa musicians. Organised in two distinct groups, these artists have integrated new elements into their practices, which could be explained by their relocation abroad. Furthermore, the comparison with the situation in other cities (in particular Paris and Montreal) allows us to assume that the situation in Brussels has a unique character.

35. The methods of learning this musical practice, which have until now been non-verbalised, are now being formalised by one of the groups, in order to meet a demand from the outside. The presence of women – mixed with men not only in secular but also ritual musical practice – is an upheaval which seems to result from being far from the Gnawa nerve centre in Morocco. The perseverance of a young musician in her project to become a *maalema* may prove to be more fruitful in Belgium than in Morocco. Finally, the diversification of performance contexts due to the low demand for Gnawa traditional music in Brussels prompts Gnawa musicians to learn other Moroccan musical styles, which they use as inspiration for their Gnawa repertoire, in theory closed to the integration of outside elements.

36. This multiplication of the types of performance, which demonstrates the capacity of the Gnawa to adapt to their host country, would be worth investigating next. Far from being activities on the side, these new types of performance seem to participate fully in the usual activities of Gnawa musicians, thus calling into question the very notion of Gnawa identity. Since they are no longer only men, no longer only born in Morocco, and no longer learn through exposure and imitation, how do the Gnawa in Brussels define themselves today? Their identity seems to be linked more to a will to keep the Gnawa memory alive, through musical practice as well as through spiritual relationships.

37. Thus, far from deploring a hypothetical loss of authenticity due to their migration, the Gnawa in Brussels have redefined their musical practices and their methods of operation, by adapting them to their new place of residence. In so doing, they continually reshape their identity, which allows them to be part of a very specific cultural and social heritage while exploring new territories.

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Financial support

Brussels Studies gets published with the support of:



Innoviris, the Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation



University Foundation



Fonds international Wernaers pour la recherche et la diffusion des connaissances

To cite this text

SECHEHAYE, Hélène and WEISSER, Stéphanie, 2015. The Gnawa musicians in Brussels: a cultural reorganisation, In: *Brussels Studies*, Number 90, August 24th 2015, www.brusselsstudies.be

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